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ABSTRACT

This study explored how black second grade girls racially identified themselves. Ten students worked on laptop computers at home to design a Barbie doll that looked like them and a Barbie doll that they liked best. Parents completed sociodemographic questionnaires and narratives. The questionnaires examined gender, skin shade, income, marital status, and educational levels. The narratives captured parents' discussions of racial issues with their children and conversations of the children while they created their dolls. The children designed dolls that had their skin, eye, and hair color and lip size and shape. They demonstrated no uncertainty or hesitancy in rejecting or accepting their own or another racial identity. They were cognizant of their degree of blackness, though the notion that fair skin and long hair are nicer was apparent. The five dark-skinned children whose two Barbie designs were identical (dark-skinned) appeared proud of their acceptance of their blackness. The parents of those children demonstrated high self-confidence and pride in their racial identity. They were visibly proud of their children's depiction of their blackness and pleased that the design they liked the best was of a dark-skinned doll. Parents, especially fathers, expressed a strong desire for their children to be conscious of and responsive to their racial or ethnic identification. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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BARBIE.COM AND RACIAL IDENTITY

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Barbie.com and Racial Identity

Abstract

This qualitative study utilized the barbie.com website to explore how females in the second grade racially identify themselves. The BARBIE.COM website was used, which allowed children to design or create all the physical and apparel features of a barbie doll. The females in this study designed or created a Barbie doll that *looked like them* and also designed or created a Barbie doll that they *liked the best*.

The study illustrated that the influence of the dominant Caucasian culture persists today. It therefore appears that the legacy equating "black" with denigration and "worthlessness" remained intact to some extent today. Additionally, the study demonstrated that issues of color were still difficult for some to accept, and consequently sought refuge in a color blind or colorless world. Furthermore, it demonstrated that those parents who sought consciously to inform their children of their Blackness and Afrocentricity were developing feelings of self-acceptance and pride in their children. This study also revealed that males appear to be more overtly expressive regarding their children's appropriate racial identification.

All the children in the study demonstrated no hint of uncertainty or hesitancy in rejecting or accepting their own or another racial identity. However, the dark-skinned children whose two Barbie designs were identical (dark-skinned) appeared be demonstrating that they have a great deal of pride in the acceptance of their Blackness. Additionally, the parents of these children were visibly proud of their children's depiction of their Blackness and even more pleased that the design they *liked the best* was black.

Introduction

This is a qualitative study that utilized the BARBIE.COM website to explore how females in the second grade racially identify themselves. The BARBIE.COM website was utilized, which allows females to develop all the physical and apparel features of a barbie doll.

> Race and ethnicity have been the most consequential characteristic classification in human history. Both classifications do share a common reference point, such as a sense of "peoplehood" of common physical and genetic ancestry. These classifications are attributed by others and conceded or vaunted by others (Gordon, 1988, p. 118).

It is this concession that was explored, incorporating the BARBIE.COM website to ascertain how first grade females racially identify themselves. Children's perception of themselves are largely influenced by their primary care takers and other significant socialization forces. In an effort to explain their racial identify, children formulated their perspectives of themselves from the images, they observed and perceived over time. The manifestation of the perspectives of "racial selves" became tangible in the Barbie dolls they created: dolls that looked like them, and dolls that they like the best.

The "racial selves" the children depicted in their drawings could be a snapshot of themselves at that point in time. Quite often, if a child's depiction of racial identity conflicts with his or her physical identity, this could be attributed to the continued exposure to inappropriate racial consciousness development. Others may content that this phenomenon occurs when the child "matches" his or her "color" with his or her stored mental frames of "color" perception.

According to Saleeby (1994, p. 354), stories are not objective or idiosyncratic creations grounded in reality; rather stories are what connect us to the external world. Moreover, the self primarily develops from our lived experience in a world of images, meanings and social connections (Saleeby 1994 cited Rosaldo 1989 p. 354).

Consequently, the continued hypothesizing pertaining to the development of racial identity among Black children and more important, the acknowledgment and ownership of racial identity among such children, warranted exploration in a qualitative paradigm. Additionally, this exploration, facilitated by computer, provided a more natural and non-intrusive mode of capturing the children's narrated and pictorial stories.

Literature Review

Many African-Americans and Black scholars still hold to the notion that the selection of a white over a black doll means the rejection of self, therefore implying self-denigrating or self-hatred (Clark & Clark, 1950, p. 342; Staples & Johnson, 1988, p. 189). Secondly, some organizations, for example the Nation Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) and the North American Council on Adoptive Children (NACAC) overtly expressed their preference for same-race adoptions versus transracial adoption (Hollinsworth, 1998, p. 112-113). Thirdly, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978 sought to prevent transcultural adoptions. For example, Native Americans parents are not allowed to place their children for adoption with non-Native Americans, who are not residing on the reservations. The tribe sanctions the adoption and placement of tribal children.

The three scenarios illustrated the belief that "different-race" exposures for children would possibly result in identify confusion (Barth, 1995, p. 50-51) or schizoid personality trait (Wilson, 1978, p. 50-51). Wilson (1978 cited DuBois 1965 p. 52) passionately described this schizoid or "two-ness" as the black man' s desire to be an "American, a Negro; two souls, two

thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one black body". It is generally thought by many scholars and writers (Wilson, 1978; Guilford, 1967; Gordon, 1978; Frazier, 1962), that some Blacks portray such an ambivalent "double-consciousness" personality. If the above concept of ambivalence is pertinent, how does and is this "double-conscious" world of the Black parents transmitted to their children?

Parental attitudes to their children's physical traits are extremely important to children's psychological well-being on racial, ethnic and cultural issues. Racism is manifested in the acceptance or rejection of a person based on skin color. Verbal appreciation of a child's complexion along with affective cutaneous stimulation facilitates the child's psychological acceptance of the physical self. Consequently, the child develops a concrete feeling of security and psychological and physical reassurance in the face of racial nuances or strange new racial dilemmas (Wilson, 1978, p. 62-63; Garvey, 1986, p. 310-311). Oddly enough, Garvey criticized DuBois, who described Garvey as a "little fat, black man; ugly, but with intelligent eyes and a big head," as being a person who "hates himself as a Black person and associates ugliness with all things that are black."

Garvey (1986) further postulated that Black parents lose their racial identity through miscegenation and assimilation, which is actually manifested in their efforts to bleach their hair, associate primarily with whites, and frequently use the word "black" in a derogatory context. These manifestations of racial self-hate and maladaptive behaviors are transmitted to black children, who perceive and process them as accepted mannerisms or denotations of Blackness.

As Freire (1990, p. 58) stated, projecting absolute ignorance, whether it be racial, ideological or social, onto others, black children in this case, negates education and knowledge of the processes of inquiry. Children gain knowledge of self, their environment and their race through invention and re-invention, though the restless, curious, impatient, continuous, hopeful inquiry of their psychosocial, parental, and humanistic world. Parents who, by whatever mode abort or negates their children's inquiry or exploration with dysfunctional racial overtones are fostering intergenerational racial identity crises.

What then are conceptual definitions or frameworks of race? According to Banton (1998) race could be conceptualized as a designation, as lineage, as a typology, as a subspecies, as a status,

as a class, and finally as a social construct. The theoretical explanation of race is primarily a socio-political construct, which changes with the social and political needs of the country. Some scholars, for example, Landrine and Klonoff (1996, p. 11) argued, "Race is but a four-letter word, a polite profanity that blames the exploited and enslaved for their exploitation and enslavement." Consequently, racial identification or classification is not stable but flexible, fluid, transitory; a construct that is maintained and projected through generations by parents, teachers, etc., while serving the political prescriptions of politicians.

Prosocial, unsocial, and antisocial behavior are not genetics gifts, but are nurtured overtime, during a child's formative and impressionable years. The formative years of a black child, if not filled with positive imagery of Blackness, will render that child a "roasted bread fruit," physically or visibly Black, but psychologically or internally White. The black child, whose social, educational, psychological and parental milieus are predominantly white-oriented, will perceive his or her black world or self as less dominant. Some scholars or Black writers (Wilson, 1978; Burkey, 1978; Madhubuti, 1990), however, would substitute the word "inferior" for "less dominant."

The ability of children to racially identify themselves would indicate their positive, pertinent, socio-cultural and intellectual development. Additionally, parents should teach their children to love themselves and their blackness. This would facilitate their love and respect for other races, and they thus would perceive the world through "non-color" lenses. Finally, the educational institutions with which parents and children interact should be prepared to assist in the cognitive, social, racial, cultural or ethnic development of both parents and children.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study adopted a qualitative, subjective, inductive approach, with the goal of generating or discovering some hypotheses. The data collection process included narratives, document analyses and socio-demographic questionnaires.

Research Inquiry/Question: How do first grade females racially identify themselves?

Design: The design was a qualitative, flexible, evolving, and emergent design, using interactive computer technology.

Significance of the Study: Is the application of technology (interactive/internet) to social work research credible. Also, does online interaction provide a more typically humanistic social situation and consequently facilitate the capturing of more credible and trustworthy data? Is the converse, the utilization of computer interactive technology, an unnatural incorporation in the qualitative paradigm?

Purpose: The application of technology in social work research is validated through the exploration of how first grade females racially identity themselves. More importantly, the study attempts to ascertain if Black children of today correctly identify themselves racially. The larger issue is, and specifically, what progress, if any, has been made since the arguments in this respect were presented in the 1954, *Brown versus the Board Of Education* case (Clark & Clark, 1950, p. 342). Sociologists in studying this phenomenon of racial miscue by misidentification, called "passing" realized that socializing or living with a specific race does not imply correct racial identification (Lyman & Douglass, 1973). Goffman (1959) postulated that the social circumstances frequently mask the reality of the phenotype or inherited physical characteristics, and, as such, the genotype becomes the primary determinant of racial identity.

Sample: The sample was selected from a co-educational, parochial, multicultural, catholic school attended primarily by Afro-centric students. The purposive sample comprised 10 second grade Black females. They were given a letter for their parents explaining the purpose, significance and nature of the study.

Measures: The following measures were completed: a socio-demographic questionnaire and a narrative. The questionnaire consisted of items such as gender, shade of skin, annual income, marital status, mother, and father's education. The narrative captured each parent's discussion of racial issues with his or her child as well as sidebar conversations of the children while they are creating their Barbie dolls. The socio-demographic information provided descriptors for the parents.

Procedure: The following protocol was followed: A meeting was held with the school's principal to discuss the details of the study. After permission was obtained, the parents were asked to complete a consent form, the background information and the narrative pertaining to their discussion of racial issues with their children. Parents were required individually to complete the background information and narrative. Each female was instructed to design her *look-a-like* and her *like-the-best* Barbie dolls with (minimal)

technical assistance from the researcher. No assistance from parent was permitted. These drawings took place on lab-tap computer in the children's home. Each child's natural environment was maintained as much as possible. Parents were not physically present when their children were designing their Barbie dolls. The designing of the dolls was an interactive, internet process (Barbie.com), which afforded each female the opportunity not only to design a Barbie doll, but to purchase the doll they designed.

Mode of Analyses: The ethnographical nature of this study supported narrative, content, and document analyses, participant observation, formal and informal interviews (sidebar conversations), and administration of surveys. Additionally, a personal, interactive and less intimidating mode of inquiry was needed to effectively work with this particular population (Sherman & Reid 1994 cited Goodson-Lawes, 1994 p. 25-27).

The intent of this study was to comprehend without judgment the perception of the females regarding their racial identity. Therefore, the investigator's attitude was not biased, and sought to understand the *meaning of actions, the thick descriptions* of the designing process, the finished drawings, and the constant sidebar conversations (Denzin, 1989).

Data Collection: Data was collected via the following modes: completion of background information and a narrative by each parent, hard copies/printouts of the Barbie dolls designed or created by the second grade females using the BARBIE.COM website, notes from the children's sidebar conversations, and, finally, snap shot photos. Each data collection process, involving the parent and the child took approximately 90 minutes.

Reliability and Validity (Triangulation): The researcher took case notes and recorded the children (sidebar conversations) during the time the children were designing their Barbie dolls. This facilitated triangulation: as the second grade females actually designed or created the Barbie dolls they racially identify with and the Barbie dolls they designed or created as their *look-a-like* and *like-the-best* favorites, based on their sidebar conversations. Furthermore, the parental narratives indicated how parent-child interaction gave the child a phenotypic perception of racial self, a constructivist modality, that is, a dialogical process of meaning-seeking and understanding that occurred between parents and children in their discourse on racial identity. (Sherman & Reid, 1994 cited Golstein 1994 p. 43)

Findings

Description of the sample

Table I below presents the characteristics of the parents surveyed in the study. One parent was asked to complete the questionnaire in two-parent homes. The selective criteria for the designated parent was that he she or should be the primary caretaker, in addition to monitoring the child academic, social, cultural, and psychological maturity.

Characteristics of the Parents (N=10)

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	4	40
Female	6	60
Shade of Skin		
Dark	3	30
Not So Dark	3	30
Fair	2	20
Very Fair	2	20
Annual Household Income		
$0.00 - $10,000	-	—
$10,001 - $20,000	-	—
$20,001 - $30,000	3	30
$30,001 - $40,000	6	60
$40,001 +	1	10
Marital Status		
Married	5	50
Separated	3	30
Divorced	-	—
Single (Never Married)	2	20
Widow/Widower	-	
Father's Education:		
Graduate or Professional School	2	20
College Degree (undergraduate)	3	30
Associate Degree	-	
Some College	-	
High School	5	50
General Ed. Diploma	-	—
Less Than High School	-	—
Mother's Education:		
Graduate or Professional School	2	20
College Degree (undergraduate)	5	50
Associate Degree	-	—
Some College	2	20
High School	1	10
General Ed. Diploma	-	—
Less Than High School	-	—

Table I illustrates that, of the ten parents four males considered themselves primary caretakers. Parent's skin color ranged from dark to very fair. The annual household income of the

parents was $20,000 or above. Fifty percent of the parents were married and all parents in the study had completed high school.

Look-Like-Them: Findings. The children in the study designed Barbie dolls that had their skin color, color eyes, size and shape lips and color hair.

During the designing phase children sidebars conversation were noted. Some of the recorded common themes and note worthy statements were:

> "My skin is black so the black Barbie looks like me."
>
> "But Mr. Steve, you see that I am black so I must make a black doll."
>
> "I am black, but I look like the light one, yes the light one."
>
> " I think I am black, my friends say I'm not black because I am light."
>
> "Why do I have to draw the black one? Is it because I look like them."
>
> "The black one is nice just like me, and she has pretty brown eyes, and long hair like me."
>
> "My mom says I am black, but I look like the white one Uncle Steve."
>
> "My father says I am a black girl so I am going to make my Barbie's face black with black people hair, but my mom say I am fair, Mr. Steve."

Like-The-Best: Findings: The designs of the "like-the-Best" dolls vary from child to child. Only five (50%) of the ten children selected the same skin color for both the Barbie that (a) *looked-like-them*, and they (b) *liked-the-best*. What is significant is that all five were dark-skinned children.

As the above children's sidebar conversations indicate, significant and common themes were captured. Some are as follows:

> " I like the light Barbie the best, because her hair is so pretty."
>
> " The black Barbie is beautiful, her skin is so nice."
>
> " The green eyes are nice."
>
> "The Barbie I like is the one that look just like me and I am black."
>
> "My daddy says I must be black and proud."
>
> "The black Barbie is so black."
>
> "My like the black Barbie the best cause I am light"
>
> "My skin is light and nice like the one I like uncle Steve."
>
> "I like long hair pretty blue eye Barbie."
>
> "Mr. Steve, I like the Barbie name Steve, he is white."

Narratives and Dialogues with the Parents: Parents made several statements in regard to their children's perspectives of their racial identity. The following are noteworthy:

> "Children should be color blind."
>
> "I teach my child that, although she looks white, she is all black."
>
> "As the man of the house, I think it is my responsibility to inform my children of their Black heritage."
>
> "We do not emphasize issues of race and/or Blackness in our household, it tends to confuse our kids."
>
> "As a Black man who is confronted with issues of racism each day, I personally take it upon myself to teach my kids, not only during Black History Month, but 365 days a year."
>
> "I sure do hope our daughter did depict herself as Black or African-American in her drawing of Barbie."
>
> "My husband really thinks our kids need to know their African culture to know themselves."
>
> "I do not care about Black and White issues. Education is what is important to my child at this point in her life."
>
> "Backs need to stop worrying about race. Slavery is over and gone."
>
> "It is extremely important to me that my child knows that she is Black, although she is so very light."

"Her father is the only person who worries about her knowing that she is Black."

"Race is important, but I certainly thinks that at this age, the only thing that children see is skin color, and thereafter we adults confuse them."

Discussion

The parents in this study were fairly well–educated and had above average socio-economic status. They demonstrated extremely high self-confidence and pride in their racial identity and exhorted their children to exhibit the same. Some, however, did not find it necessary to thrust the idea of a racial self-concept and racial identity on their children. Some parents' narratives poignantly indicated that their children must become cognizant of who they are culturally, nationally, and also in term of their ethnicity.

The vast majority of parents though that the idea of racial identity recognition and cognition is an age-appropriate process. Therefore, until that point, children should be allowed to exist in a "color-blind" world. However, they exhibited a great deal of anxiety as to how their children racially depicted themselves and even more anxiety over the skin color of the Barbie doll they *liked-the-best*. Even more disturbing for some parents were those

children, (three in number), who accurately depicted themselves racially as brown (Black), but who designed Barbie dolls they *liked-the best* as those with Caucasian (White) skin color.

Of the seven children with dark skin, only three designated Barbies they *liked-the-best* and Barbies that *looked-like-them* with dark skin color. All of these had males as their primary caretakers. This observation is supported from the fact that fathers in their narratives and interviews expressed a strong desire for their children to be conscious of and responsive to their Blackness or ethnicity. They expressed and emphasized their commitment by proclaiming that their children would be attending Black colleges and universities.

On the contrary, such sentiments were not strongly expressed by females of children with fair or very fair skin color. They, however, desired that their children become aware of who they are racially, "never to loose sight of their Blackness" and "not to allow the issue of skin color blind them and make opaque a very transparent world." Children from parents who expressed such sentiments appeared to waiver in the designation of the Barbie that *looked-like-them* versus the Barbie they *liked-the-best*. They, nonetheless, accurately depicted themselves racially. However, in

designing the Barbie they *liked-the-best*, invariably they choose a Barbie of a different skin color. It appeared they were projecting the color-blind conceptions of their parents, specifically expressed by the female caretakers.

The results do indicate that the children are cognizant of the degree of their Blackness. Nonetheless, the notion of fair skin and long hair being "nicer and prettier' was apparent. The Barbies they *liked-the-best* seemed to be those with Eurocentric not Afrocentric phenotypic characteristics. Notwithstanding, all of the children expressed a great amount of satisfaction with who they were and also exuded tremendous self-confidence in the designation of the Barbie that *looked-like-them* and also the Barbie they *liked-the-best*.

All the children demonstrated no hint of uncertainty or hesitancy in rejecting or accepting their own or another racial identity. However, the dark skinned children, whose two Barbie designs were identical (dark skinned), appeared to want to show that they had a great deal of pride in the acceptance of their Blackness. Additionally, the parents of these children were visibly proud of their children's depiction of their Blackness, and were even more pleased that the Barbie they *liked-the-best* was Black.

Conclusion

This study is not the first of its typology. Numerous studies have been completed that examined African-American children's perception of their racial identity. This study illustrates that the influence of the dominant Caucasian culture persists today. Therefore it appears that the legacy, which equates black with denigration and worthlessness, remains intact to some extent today. For example, Black hair texture was characterized as kinky, "nappy" or "not good" hair. Other traditional physical indicators of Black denigration included an aversion to brown eyes (versus green and blue eyes), wider and more flattened nose (versus pointed nose), thick lips (versus narrow or less fuller lips), and short length of hair (versus long flowing hair). Recently, a number of Eurocentric women have adopted artificially thickened or fuller lips and have even attempted to make their hair kinky or "nappy." None of the children in the study, however, revealed any affective or self-esteem related confusion over any subset of phenotypes (e.g., shape of nose, texture of hair, etc.,) that distinguished them racially from Whites or distinguished them from each other.

Additionally the study demonstrated that issues of color are still difficult for some to accept who consequently seek refuge in a

color-blind or colorless world. Furthermore, it demonstrates that those parents who sought to inform their children of their Blackness and Afrocentricity were developing and inbreeding feelings of self-acceptance and pride in their children. This study also demonstrated that males appeared to be more overtly expressive regarding their children's appropriate racial identification. Even so, females manifested affective and verbal concerns as to whether their children did correctly depicted themselves racially. However, the greatest of level of apprehension among the parents was over their children who did not like who they were racially.

This apprehension was evident in the case in which one parent repeatedly questioned her daughter by asking her, "Are you sure this *looks-like-you*" and "are you sure, real sure, this is the Barbie you *like-the-best*?" An interesting aspect of the study was that the children all appeared to be very self-confident and proud of whom they were. Not only was this self-confidence communicated in their sidebar conversations, which occurs during the creation of their Barbie dolls, but in the their interactions and conversations with their parents pertaining to their racial identity, and subsequently their Barbie creations.

Much more research is needed to understand the psychology of racial identification, specifically among children. It would be interesting to ascertain the age at which children start to identify skin color and other physical attributes with race. Also, important is the determination of what factors or circumstances stimulate denial or acceptance of the racial self. If this identification changes overtime, what stimulates such a change, and in what context does such a change occur? Does a child's denial of his or her racial identity impacts his or her psychological self and fosters racial-specific pathological ideations? In view of the above observations, continued research in both the qualitative and quantitative modalities of racial or ethnic identification is necessary to the ongoing revelation, discourse and knowledge building into children's perception of their racial identity.

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